



# TOWARDS A COOPERATIVE EGOISM

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## Foreword

Before I begin, I'd like to say that this text isn't exactly *fully* original. I have written this to outline my personal philosophy, which is an Agorist spin on Egoist-Communism. This philosophy mainly draws from others' interpretations of Egoist-Communism and my own thoughts on how they could be brought about with counter-economics. I haven't modified the original interpretations much except to incorporate my own ideas, since in my opinion they're mostly good already. Having this in mind, I have put a list of sources at the bottom of this essay so I am not an unabashed plagiarist.

## I. Egoism

Above all else—even above anarchism—I am an egoist. I am an anarchist taken to its logical extreme, stopping at nothing in promoting my ownness, my ownership of myself, when I can. I reject hierarchy in all of its forms. This can include the State, but also the concepts of law and government; it can include Capitalism, but also the concepts of “right” and “wrong” used to describe it. I claim all I can grasp in this world as my property, whether they be the tangible land I live on or food I eat, or the intangible abstractions of society, morality, etc.

My Egoism arises from a desire for practicality. What am I to do against that which I cannot yet vanquish? What am I to do against the prison? I aim to eventually blast its gates and tear down its fences, biding my time and subverting the watchful eye of the guard until then. I do not intend to make the stick I am beaten with “the people's stick” or put the stick in new hands like an impractical do-nothing. I follow myself, my own preferences, and my own song that only I can sing.

As a means to that end, I adopt Communism as a practice and Counter-Economics as a weapon. However, I do not adopt the Communism of the Vanguardists and their spooky concepts like the “dictatorship of the proletariat”. Instead, I adopt its end goal of a stateless, classless, moneyless society. Similarly, I do not adopt the original, market-centric and moralistic definition of

Counter-Economics, but I abolish markets as a *modus operandi* and instead encompass all that regulated or prohibited by the State.

It is from these ideas that I create the philosophy of *cooperative egoism*.

## II. Ownership & Cooperatives

I cannot own myself if I am already owned by capital. When the means of production, the means to get what I need, are owned by other people, I risk subjecting myself to their will to get what I want. For commodity production, this risk gives way to an incentive for the proprietors to exploit those who do not own property for their own gain. Private ownership only takes away from me what would be put to better use as my own property.

In order to free myself, I have to own every means as to prevent a higher authority from forming. A higher authority, a hierarchy, would create a monopolization of anything I may need or want. But as I cannot own any of the means of production under someone who does, neither can I own all of them as a sole owner. As a proprietor, a have, I would face a similar dilemma as I would a have-not. I can only have access to the means that power a particular enterprise unless I subjugate myself to or compete with others for more. As Stirner pointed out:

*“What is most useful is open to argument. And now, sure enough, it turns out... that in competition, not everyone finds his profit, his desired ‘private advantage’, his value, his actual interest.”*

At this point, one may think to abolish private property in favor of common ownership of the means of production. If all the means are owned by everyone, and one belongs to everyone, they own and have access to everything held in that common. But there is always a hesitation to embrace that idea out of fear of a tyranny of the majority, which is fair. Common ownership can only maximize individual autonomy if everyone has equal power over the property.

Common ownership cannot be compatible with freedom as long as it's ruled by the spooky and intangible collective. Leaving my property and choices to some phantasmic and religious “We” is just as bad as leaving it to a capitalist. Rather, I will shun the traditional concept of common ownership and instead practice *cooperative ownership*, wherein those partaking in a union of egoists establish a mutual trust to work together to provide something for themselves. A union like this could be considered an “egoist cooperative”, where it's distinct from typical unions because of that mutual trust and desire.

Such unions of egoists working together so that each may benefit more closely follow Stirner's definition of “*a sword with which you sharpen and increase your natural force*” rather than anything the Soviets put out, and roam even closer to Nietzsche's concept of “unions”:

*“My idea is that every specific body strives to become master over all space and to extend its force (--its will to power) and to thrust back all that resists its extension. But it continually encounters similar efforts on the part of other bodies and ends by coming to an arrangement (‘union’) with those of them that are sufficiently related to it: thus*

*they conspire together for power.”*

In the egoist cooperative, the mutual trust, I am looking to conspire with others for power so that I am free to pursue my desires. I do not necessarily consider all the unions I partake in a “cooperative”, but do so when I feel that it is the better option to get what I want.

### **III. Economy**

There is another factor that makes cooperative egoism’s form of communism different from others. To further avoid an authority alien to the individual (a centralized authority, intangible concept or otherwise), the resources produced by or used by the means of production are distributed by egoist cooperatives on the basis of use and labor. Through cooperative egoism, if I wanted something I couldn’t get myself then I would not have to rely on a central organization to help me get it. Instead, I would meet with other people who also want it and already work to have or obtain it. I would help those I have unionized with, and once we have produced or obtained it we would all take our share. Although, this does not rule out the existence of a central distributor, only that that distributor must be voluntary.

Cooperative egoists, although not specifically opposed to informal competition, are still opposed to formal markets, and never intend to create them. The existence of a formal market usually always leads to the formation of currencies, and thus, centralization; with the inconvenient tendency of markets to create monopolies and hierarchies, a pseudo-state, if not a full one becomes unavoidable. Furthermore, and likely most importantly, the existence of the profit motive would most certainly corrupt the mutuality of unions. We would only have the same problem we began with, of having our property withheld from us by higher authorities.

Having informal markets is fine and even expected in cooperative egoism. Things like gift economies (although likely without the social expectation of reciprocity) and bartering can serve to stand where formal markets do now. Furthermore, unions can also compete based on who is most enjoyable to work with and is most talented rather than *just* who sells the best product. A varying combination of price and quality is a shallow and impractical way of measuring success in a market; there are other factors for consumers to consider, not just in regard to the products they buy but in their quality of life. This is the ultimate reason cooperative egoism strays from traditional formal markets.

Let’s look at an example of competition occurring with egoist cooperatives: If a union makes the best milk around and is the most pleasurable to work with, then naturally more people will want to join it. Once there becomes more members of the union, if the amount continues to increase then there may be a time when the splitting of products leads to members getting less of that product; if this occurs then a group within the union has the opportunity to split off to form their own union. This splinter union may take the skills that they built up from the other union in order to make quality products for themselves. This pattern is likely to create a branch out effect of competition; through learning and improving skills, unions can split, branch out, and generally improve quality and quantity of benefit, and union conditions.

Of course, not everyone can be expected to put so much time and effort into production, whether restricted by personal reasons (such as wanting more free time) or uncontrollable factors (such as being disabled). Communes are a solution to this, because a commune is meant to encompass more needs and potentially luxuries. It may even be more effective to form communes of egoists than staying as individual cooperatives depending on the case. The only difference between a union of egoists and a commune of egoists in this context is that a commune deals with a wider range of demands. A union that produces milk may concentrate on milk, but its communal equivalent may be more likely to concentrate on food in general.

What form a commune takes is ultimately up to its members, but I think the most likely and best model would be similar to a cooperative federation—in this case, an egoist cooperative where the members are egoist cooperatives themselves. Such an arrangement may come about if multiple cooperatives band together to acquire what they each need by collectively working for it or, when participating in the informal market, obtaining what they want from each other, other individuals and cooperatives or even other federations. It's also possible that this model could be arbitrarily extended into a federation of federations and so on, but it may be better to just stay at federations of cooperatives to avoid alienation and the potential formation of a higher authority.

The egoist takes no hesitation in grabbing their property, in determining their own worth and power, and in forming unions with others who share their goals. By joining forces to form unions and communes/federations, we have vastly more power, a collective power, to seize and manage property than if we attempted to obtain that property by ourselves. Through cooperative ownership, the individual can exercise control over more of their property. Their property is not blocked off from their reach by money, private property, or the state. Our cooperative ownership is an ownership in which the commonality of property allows any individual to take and manage what they want. It is a common ownership independent of a default, and higher central distributor that allows for individuals to have complete control over their property.

By abolishing currency and formal markets, individuals are able to freely measure themselves through their standards and their demand, not according to the amount of money they have or the popularity of the products they make. The amount of money I have may be influenced by my effort or talent, but in the end, it is the property owners and consumers who decide how much my effort is worth to them. The products I may sell only give me profit according to the demand of the consumers. I refuse to have my value, my power, be determined by anything other than myself. Even if I get satisfaction from another's enjoyment of my talent, without my relying on it for survival and property, I can always do things and make things just for my enjoyment. Through this form of communism, we can occupy ourselves to our enjoyment, not to measure up to a separate value system or the enjoyment of others only.

#### **IV. Counter-Economics**

The movement in its present condition is too small to usurp the state of things. There will come a time when it has matured enough that it can compete with and even annihilate those things holding up the status quo. But this does not mean that we have to abandon cooperative egoism as a lifestyle, nor would its achievement be a far-flung, future ideal like the establishment of a

communist society is under Marxism-Leninism. But if that's not the case, then what's an egoist to do? As Stirner pointed out, we can employ subversion:

*"I get around a rock that stands in my way, till I have powder enough to blast it; I get around the laws of a people, till I have gathered strength to overthrow them."*

So how are we to go around the rock of society and its reigning institutions? We need only look at what lies below it, what is just out of its view: the counter-economy. The counter-economy is described in a pamphlet by Samuel Edward Konkin III called "Counter-Economics: What It Is, How It Works" as "the sum of all non-aggressive Human Action which is forbidden by the State." He further defines it as including "the free market, the Black Market, the 'underground' economy, all acts of forbidden association (sexual, racial, cross-religious), and anything else the State, at any place or time, chooses to prohibit, control, regulate, tax or tariff." It "excludes all State-approved action (the 'White Market') and the Red Market (violence and theft *not* approved by the State)."

There are many examples of counter-economies now and in the past that have subverted the authority of the state and their society, such as America's Underground Railroad, the grassroots *Samizdat* publishers who evaded Soviet censorship, and, most notably, Peru's informal economy in the 1980's (which was thoroughly described in Hernando Soto Polar's book *The Other Path: The Economic Answer to Terrorism*). What Peru had in the 80's was likely the closest real-world example of a full counter-economy. It wasn't a supplement to the legal economy (the "white market") to supply people with illegal drugs, services, etc., but was the economy itself. With this in mind, there shouldn't really be much doubt as to the potential counter-economics has as a revolutionary method, especially for a fledgling movement like egoism (let alone cooperative egoism).

But counter-economics isn't *fully* compatible with egoism—not its original concept, anyway. It still uses markets as its method and holds its sacred ideal of non-aggression on a pedestal. I doubt that these markets would have much formality to them other than, for example, using their host country's currency. But for the sake of consistency, I'd like to emphasize the cooperative egoist counter-economy as *the practice of cooperative egoism outside the bounds of the state*. If formal markets with currency can lead to centralization in a cooperative egoist society, I don't see any reason why the same couldn't happen in a counter-economy. The state would simply be replaced with, for example, protection rackets by organized crime rings in that case.

Furthermore, it decides itself and its permitted actions on the ideal of non-aggression. It even goes so far as to declare counter-economics as a means of *nonviolent revolution*! But what reason would you have to limit yourself to peaceful actions except the false foundation of morals? If not morals, then practicality. There will most definitely be some instances where aggression may be beneficial to the counter-economy, such as that an individual, union or federation may employ to defend itself from external or internal attacks. But if non-aggression turns out to be useful for the counter-economy in other instances (say, it fosters trust between individuals and unions), then I see no reason in resisting it beyond self-defense of the

movement. In other words, it may be more practical (and ideologically consistent) to deploy diversity of tactics over total non-aggression.

It is a waste of time to stick with groups that no longer serve a purpose. Rallies and protests are almost always nothing more than reaction to yet another abuse by the state and bourgeois, and they have maintained their status because of that. We already live under this system, and trying to stop it from encroaching on what little autonomy we have left is counterproductive. Rather than fighting authority when it shows itself, it's better to be in a constant state of insurrection. The most effective way to carry out this continuous insurrection is by, through the counter-economy, enacting mutually beneficial relations on both an economic and interpersonal basis, and creating spaces of autonomy to better enact these relations.

## **V. Revolution**

To embrace counter-economics as our method only requires that we include it in what we consider adopting cooperative egoism as a lifestyle. We can create counter-economic networks that have specific goals in mind and can be spontaneously mobilized and dissolved as needed. Through this, we can keep ourselves from being alienated by a lack of action. If we want something done we organize only so much as to get things done and then dissolve.

The counter-economy, a movement of networks of union of egoists, will start out small. We can employ the introverted (vertical) and extroverted (horizontal) strategies of counter-economics invented by Per Bylund in "A Strategy for Forcing the State Back":

*"As has already been briefly stated, this strategy consists of falling out of the large structures of the State in order to at a much smaller scale build infrastructures and technology to support one's community. I'm calling this the vertical strategy since it literally means stepping away from the centralized mode of the State in order to supply for one's life and well-being in a decentralized, local manner. It is in the same sense introvert in that it says we should be looking at what is and not what is not, i.e. to use the resources available rather than pursuing the unattainable."*

*"The other strategy simply means taking part in and actively creating networks and structures for black markets. I call this the horizontal strategy because it is simply the free market in action – individuals trading voluntarily with each other. It is also an extrovert strategy in that it does not necessarily focus on the neighborhood or community, but can easily be stretched throughout a city or state and work in parallel with the coercive structures of the State."*

We can use horizontal strategies to create more unions of egoists, spread our ideas and create a supporting infrastructure, and vertical strategies to create spaces of autonomy. We will form unions of egoists to become self-sufficient, contact more unions and, when the State's authority is sufficiently undermined, seize the areas we developed vertically to create autonomous zones. When we create communist relations in a particular area, we have occupied it. After an area has been occupied, we will build up self-sufficiency. Once an occupied area has become fully

self-sufficient, it has become an autonomous zone. Those who make up this zone will have successfully created a unique space of freedom, a small area in which society has collapsed.

But we egoists want more than that. We will not settle for scattered plots of anarchy. We will eventually need to strive for more. This need not be a set plan to take over the world, but it is instead the logical progression of things. The spread of our methods and ideas is key to the progression of the material conditions created by cooperative egoism. Once autonomous establishments are created, and in possession of more resources and manpower, hostility toward local state and capitalist authority will escalate into violence. Despite our plan to slowly and clandestinely expand, we must always be sure to defend ourselves from being snuffed out before we can go on the full offensive. This is a good example of a time where aggression would be used in self-defense.

Perhaps these egoistic relations don't last, and get beat down and scattered by the state. No matter. We will just create new ones; even if the state puts those down, they still cannot stop the spread of our lifestyle. In a society built and maintained on servility, any blossoming of freedom and ownership is a rebellion. Any free territory, any commune, any union is a slap in the face of that which considers itself alien to me. Nothing is alien to me as all the world I occupy is seen through my eyes. I will stomp out the dignity of any so-called "authority" that claims itself independent of me. The capitalist system desires all that I have, even that my survival is on its terms. It literally demands the world of me. I destroy it bit by bit when I diverge to collaborate in my method, a method of complete opposition to it and every system like it. The existence of its lacking in any area disrupts its production and lures its slaves away. The individual prospers off the fall of capitalism, and eventually the fall of society.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Technology can be harnessed to provide our every need. An entire galaxy awaits at our fingertips. So why should our existence be boiled down to buying and selling? Doesn't that limit our Unique? Can you feed your family alone? Can I? Can we alone provide electricity to our homes and maintain the systems that keep everything going? If we can't, shouldn't we work together? If we still can't, shouldn't we find others? And when we find them, won't they desire to own just as much of the fruits of our collective labor as we do? Why can't we have individual indulgence with a joyous community life; why not lawlessness with the cause of social justice?

These are the questions that the philosophy of cooperative egoism answers. Cooperative egoism might be thought of as mutualism without markets. A honeycomb of groups of friends and colleagues working together to live life as joyously as they can and free from the false divisions of race, nationality, class, gender, etc. It promotes differentiation, embraces chaos, and takes gangs of individuals as its organizational unit instead of a manufactured society. It is the abolition of all that limits the Unique and the search for other like-minded souls to increase each other's power.

Myself, my union and my commune is my property, something to utilize, but most importantly another win in the battle against society. To destroy, blaspheme, and occupy everything held in sacredness and authority is our method. To liberate ourselves is our goal. No spook is left sacred,

no hierarchy left un-toppled, and individuals are all that remain as the only reality. The only way of life is our own. Capitalism has tied us up with its capital; the state, its divine right of kings. As our *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* to both, we will free ourselves through the abolition of all capitalist and statist constructs, and create a stateless, classless, moneyless society through that destruction.

### **Sources**

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